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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000860

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SUBJECT: ARREST OF "SONS OF IRAQ" LEADER LEADS TO FIGHTING
IN CAPITAL, RISING TENSION

Classified By: PMIN Robert S. Ford, 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: The March 28 arrest of a prominent "Sons of Iraq" (SOI) leader, Adil al-Mashadani, in the Fadhil neighborhood of central Baghdad led to fighting between Iraqi Army units and SOI forces. U.S. military advisor units participated in the Iraqi Army operation. The incident increased tension in the capital, including among other SOI groups (in Baghdad and beyond) who have expressed concerns to us about alleged Iraqi Government sectarian motivations -- on top of prior SOI complaints over late or non-payment of their salaries. Iraqi media have widely covered the fighting, adding to a general sense of unease among residents in the capital, who fear a more widespread return of violence. END SUMMARY.

ARREST INCREASES TENSION

12. (S) Iraqi military forces, accompanied by U.S. military advisors, arrested SOI leader Adil al-Mashadani during a March 28 operation in the al-Fadhil neighborhood in the center of Baghdad. Mashadani, a Sunni Arab, commanded the Sons of Iraq unit (aka "Awakening" council -- an armed neighborhood watch) in Fadhil, a Sunni enclave in mainly Shi'a east central Baghdad, which had previously been an Al Qaeda in Iraq stronghold. Reportedly, all major roads into the area remain blocked and sporadic gunfire continued through March 29, with initial clashes leaving several Iraqis killed and wounded.

13. (S) On March 29, Coalition Forces participated jointly with the Iraqi Army in an operation to disarm Mashadani's men. Mashadani had been quoted in the local media complaining about the non-payment of Awakening members (payments were interrupted in February in the midst of a budgetary struggle between parliament and the executive). Mashadani warned that the salary interruptions would increase the likelihood that SOI members could be recruited back into a partnership with Al Qaeda terrorists and affiliated extremists. He had also told local media prior to his arrest that "until now, we have just promises (from the government) ... Al Qaeda and other armed groups are ready to give us a lot of money." Mashadani has been a controversial figure in the past, with the GOI and even some fellow Sunni leaders previously voicing concerns to us in private about his allegedly illegal and/or gang-like activities.

14. (C) Comments from other SOI leaders in Baghdad highlights growing concerns (and a degree of confusion) over the U.S.

role in the arrest. Sheikh Salam Hatim (strictly protect), a Sunni Waqf advisor on Tribal Affairs and leader of 400 Sahwa in the Tarmiyah area of northern Baghdad, told us March 29 that while "there might have been good reasons for arresting Mashadani, maybe he was running a criminal gang, but the absence of any explanation is being interpreted as part of a plan" to eliminate the SOI. Hatim added that fears had spread about a reemergence of sectarian elements in the government "enabled by the Coalition to dismantle Sahwa and crush its leaders." Two other prominent Sunni Arab tribal group leaders in West Baghdad also intimated to poloff March 29 that the Mashadani arrest must have had advance American knowledge and approval. One of our best IIP mid-level Qknowledge and approval. One of our best IIP mid-level contacts told us March 30 that the Sunni street right now is very tense. People are confused as to why this arrest happened now and they are very tense. He also told us that on March 29 he met with people from Muqtada al-Sadr's group. The Sadrists are also nervous and upset about this incident, he claimed and they anticipated more violence in the capital. While we heard plenty of worries from our contacts, one SoI leader in the Sunni Arab Adhamiya district seemed less concerned. Adhamiya was quiet, he observed to us March 29, and he hoped that tensions would calm.

OTHER SOI QUESTION
MOVE AS SECTARIAN

15. (C) A senior SOI contact in the Tarmiyah area of Baghdad told us that Mashadani's "followers" had been calling other

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SOI, saying "you cannot trust Maliki, the Americans want to please him and wash their hands of it; they are leaving." There are reports of growing tension in Tarmiyah, with suggestions that SOI there might be preparing to fight. (NOTE: SOI there did not flag the lack of SOI payments as the main issue, but rather mounting perceptions of a return to sectarian motivations within the government and ISF actions. END NOTE.) Like Mashadani, some of our contacts are warning that pressuring the SoI could lead either to better recruiting possibilities for al-Qaida groups or disinterest among the SoI in continuing to confront AQI.

16. (C) An independent Sunni Arab parliamentarian from Mosul said to us March 29 that the incident showed that "sectarian conflict" remained a concern inside the government, and that SOI should be "rewarded, not ignored." A prominent Sunni politician and tribal leader in Baghdad, Sheikh Omar al-Jabouri, told us that the situation with Sahwa elements "remained tense" and had led to new fears among Baghdad residents. He said the Sahwa are worried and confused by reports that the government wanted to reach out to former Baathists and ex-insurgents, but then approved an operation directed at a prominent SOI leader.

COMMENT

17. (C) After payment delays and slow hiring into the security forces and other government jobs, Mashadani's arrest has, unsurprisingly, heightened suspicions among many in the Sunni Arab community about the GOI's intentions regarding the future of the program -- and fear of more ISF actions directed against them and their leaders. While SOI have readily acknowledged and welcomed past U.S. support for a smooth handover of the program to the government, the involvement of U.S. forces in the operation has caused some SOI to question U.S. motivations -- as reflected in initial comments we have already heard. The Mashadani incident reminds us that security in Baghdad remains fragile. Reassuring SOI leaders depends upon PM Maliki's ability to convince Sunni Arabs that he and his government view them as

partners in building the new Iraq. He was making genuine headway with his stance on Kirkuk and the Arab-Kurd dispute in the North. The Mashadani arrest on top of the payment and hiring problems for SoI fighters has raised among them new questions. For many Sunni Arabs, Maliki's efforts to win their trust have seemed more symbolic than real.

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